

# Perceptions And Reflections On Popular Music In Zimbabwe Today.

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## **Abstract**

*In this article we looked at popular music in view of music promoters in the Zimbabwe music industry. Music promoters have found themselves striving for survival in an economy subdued by a scourge of music piracy and a working class with little or no disposable income. The study shows that in the Zimbabwean urban context popular music business is hinged upon profit making. Socio-political and economic factors inform the evolution of popular music over time. From the 1960s to the 1970s popular music was influenced by the emergence of nationalism and the struggle for political independence. From the 1980s to the late 1990s celebration of independence from colonialism were central to popular music themes and genres. The years 2000 to 2009 saw the rise of digital technology in the midst of a shrinking economy and a growing dire need for solace through music. The current times have seen the shift towards an increased use of digital technology in recording, production, marketing, sales, and consumption of many genres in popular music. Furthermore, promoters and popular musicians have preferred using real music instruments at live performance shows as opposed to lip syncing. The study recommends that further research be undertaken to find more factors shaping the promotion of popular music in Zimbabwe.*

**Key words:** Popular music, music promoter, music marketing, music management, mass media, modern technology

## **Background and aim**

In popular culture music that is popular has mass appeal, is cross-cultural and transcends regional, ethnic, economic, political, and educational boundaries. Popular music is mass-produced and sold to a wide audience. Popular music is created to appeal to the majority. Manuel (1998) defines popular music as reproducing and selling cultural products in a mass market through the mass media. In other words popular music requires a large audience as a ready market to buy the music as well as the media to publish and advertise the music to the audience. Popular music is consciously marketed to people in order to obtain high sales of music albums. The life of a popular song is tied directly to its appeal reflected by its rise and fall on the sales charts. Manuel (1998:2) noted that popular music is primarily urban in providence and audience oriented. On the other hand popular music is performed by not very highly trained musicians. Popular music also bears a stylistic relationship to the art music of its culture but has got a lower degree of sophistication.

Manuel (1998) extends the view that the rise of popular music has been the most significant event in 20<sup>th</sup> century music. Socio-economic and technological developments accompanying modernity have engendered a proliferation of new music styles, musical instruments and live performance contexts and led to an entirely new realm of music with a larger collective audience. Popular music embodies and expresses new social identities which emerge as products of urbanization and modernization throughout the world. The mass media has plays a key role in influencing people to like popular music, especially recording, reproduction and broadcasting. He goes on to describe popular music as the music of the people and as the new forms of music that have arisen in this century in relation to the mass media. This definition actually explains that for the music to become popular, it has to garner support from the audience or public. Popular music is typical in societies with relatively highly developed division of labour and a clear distinction between producers and consumers, in which cultural products are created largely by professionals.

In his discourse Chitando (2001:47) points out that, “Although economic hardships were being experienced, popular music continued to provide the leisure, solace and social commentary that the consumers yearned for”. Basing on the above view, popular

music has continued to serve the people with leisure, solace and an avenue for social commentary. Although some of the above basic psychological needs are viewed as luxury, they actually make or break people in real life matters.

The current study aimed to build our knowledge of indicators of Zimbabwe's popular music genres, as well as knowledge of factors that motivate local music promoters to fork out large sums of money to promote music artistes. Our research question was to find out which artistes and genres are usually targeted by Zimbabwean music promoters in showbiz. We aimed to search for the reason why promoters have a specific focus on the music brands that they target. It is notable that live show promoters pursue artists who perform sungura, dancehall, gospel, rap and fusions of Zimbabwean traditional genres. In particular, we focused on investigating whether or not promoters made profit from the live shows at the venues where the artists under their promotion perform. We approached this study with the argument that music promoters are out to invest money in anticipation of gaining profits in return, and are not out to just spend their hard earned money on music brands that will not sell significantly. For this reason, we expected promoters to invest in artists who attract large crowds, and to lead us to get to know the artistes who are currently popular in Zimbabwe. We expected positive correlations between promoter intentions and promoter gains.

## **Theory and method**

Analysis in this article is informed by Tagg's (1982) hermeneutic semiological method which he explains in his methodological paradigm of popular music analysis. His theoretical basis for popular music analysis renders popular culture as the object of analysis, and in our case the objects of analysis are popular music genres in Zimbabwe which include gospel, sungura, rap and dancehall music. We examine what motivates these genres and endeavor to understand what the music communicates and how the audiences receive these popular culture products. Tagg (1982:65) argues that "Analyzing popular music takes the fun seriously and is itself both a serious business and a lot of fun".

The culture industries, especially the popular music industry, have long been privileged sites of explanation for theories of flexible accumulation, even to the extent that Scott Lash and John Urry (1994) take popular music as their exemplary instance of what they (perhaps a bit optimistically) call 'postorganized capitalism' (1987). This is one of the principal reasons why any stance towards Adorno and Marxism in popular music studies

must at least address more recent theories of capitalist organization. Debates have raged about both the extent and the nature of the economic and geographic transformations involved; but very few scholars doubt that changes in technology, communications and computerized design have altered production and consumption, and even theoretically modest studies like Alfred Chandler's *Scale* (2003: 135)

And so-called 'active audience' theories can, to some extent, claim vindication in commercial reality: the affordability of quick, small-batch production in the music industry has rendered audience agency visible in ways that belie Adorno's nightmare of mass passivity and uniform transformations of consciousness. (2003:137)

The capitalist theory of organization perhaps lends itself more to the western concepts of passive entertainment and the notion of capital gains as the main focus of popular music to a large extent. The promotion of popular music is hence driven by these forces. Contrariwise the conception of entertainment on the African point of view embraces the conception of an active and a participative audience to the mode of entertainment.

The information in this paper was a result of qualitative research paradigm employing methodology that allowed for personal interaction with respondents. It was also important to carry out analysis of the trends exhibited by the promoters of various genres within the domain of popular music in Zimbabwe. Writing and transcription of the dialogues followed this approach and the advantage of doing that was that it allowed us to investigate everything presented. As researchers we could read in between the lines and probe further to solicit the desired information from the subjects. The model of interviews allowed us to take control of the conversations while at the same time according the respondents privacy, respect and confidence as required of this kind of research. We conducted the research process professionally and deliberately avoided sensitive issues and kept our focus on popular music in Zimbabwe through the eyes of the promoters.

## **Results**

Our findings in this study demonstrate that even though popular music thrives to appeal to the population in urban Zimbabwe music promoters are mainly hinged on matters of profit gains as key concern in business thereby overriding the demands for quality. Socio-political and economic factors have influenced the evolution of popular music.

From the 1960s to the late 1970s the unfolding events were dominated by African nationalism and the struggle for political independence. The years after independence in 1980 to the late 1990s were punctuated by wide spread celebration of the independence from colonialism. 2000 to 2009 was a period with a myriad of economic hardships for the populace with no apparent solution. Despite the prevalence of a plethora of music promoters, they could not circumvent the resultant pressure from harsh economic conditions aggravated by music piracy abdicated from normal business operations. The masses with very little or not enough disposable income to buy music amidst a shrinking economy drifted toward seeking solace in music through buying cheap illicitly produced CDs.

From 2009 to 2015 there has been a shift towards an increased use of digital production, marketing, sales, and consumption of popular music. There has been a steady rise in the number of musicians recording their music in their own home-based studios. Digitalization has greatly reduced time taken to undertake recording projects. Due to the above-mentioned facts music promoters have made more efforts to take advantage of the current socio-economic climate in Zimbabwe to boost business. Furthermore, promoters have resorted to using real musical instruments at live performances as a way to market and advertise music artists and the music through shows instead of just playing CDs.

The trend of singing along pre-recorded music is gradually losing grip even though it was a benefit that came with digital technology, reducing the need for many band members to accompany a musician. However, promoters have now resorted to holding live shows with accompaniment from live musical instruments a trend that has become favourable act especially for the revellers and patrons attending the live performance venues around Zimbabwe.

Chitando (2001) further observes that from the 1980s to the mid 1990s popular music took a commemorative tilt to celebrate the hard won independence for Zimbabwe. However, at the turn of the millennium, with looming economic hardships, Zimbabwe saw the emergence of an increased appeal to popular music with a gospel slant. The appeal to gospel perhaps was to implore for divine intervention from the Almighty God using Biblical lyrical content. Music promoters capitalized on this opportunity to increase their space and influence in music business too. The years 2010 to 2015 have seen a paradigm shift toward more digital based production of popular music in the mould of hip-hop, dancehall music, gospel, urban grooves and sungura just to name a few genres. The same trend has also lured music promoters in Zimbabwe to utilize the space and time to make high profit margins.

In Zimbabwe popular music genres include sungura, rap, and dancehall music. Zindi (2003) mentions that Zimbabwean popular music has not been treated on an equal footing as popular music by western record companies due to the belief that it will sell the millions of copies that mainstream popular music does. Zindi (2003) brings out an important concept of popular music agreed on by many writers on popular music. The above referred concept is that popular music sells millions of copies to a broad audience. This is what distinguishes popular music from folk music and classical music (Starr and Waterman, 2003). Popular music is for the people, mass-produced, marketed and widely distributed. We sought to get the facts about popular music in Zimbabwe from music promoters who have lived experiences of what happens on the economic side of music business.

In terms of popularity, sungura music has dominated record sales in Zimbabwe for quite a number of years. Muranda and Maguraushe (2014) noted that record companies actually led to a proliferation of sungura music artists in Zimbabwe as they urged upcoming artists to play this genre of music. Resultantly, there emerged numerous sungura musicians who either emulated or copied the big name trendsetters. This was done in pursuit of the possible financial gains that they stood to realise since sungura music had recorded high weekly sales in Zimbabwe (Mhiripiri, 2011). Muranda and Maguraushe (2014) actually quoted a financial director at Gramma Records who said that more than seventy percent of musicians who were contracted to their record label specialised in sungura music.

Zimbabwean dancehall music is believed to be a genre of popular music that has manifested itself since the late 1990s in Zimbabwe spearheaded by Simbarashe Maphosa, Garry DJ and Garry B Chiwala. The Zimbabwean Dancehall scene is populated by various artists, largely characterized by Shona vernacular songs that appeal mostly to ghetto youths. Zimbabwean dancehall music has now become at par with sungura music in terms of popularity as it has gained mass appeal. Some DJs have played a key role in its dissemination during live shows thereby helping to commercialize local dancehall music. This genre of popular music is assumed to have strongly borrowed many elements from other countries. Zindi (2003:9) noted that “There is no single name to the music coming to Zimbabwe because of the fusion with foreign elements and music styles”. Zimbabwean dancehall music seems to have borrowed foreign dancing styles, skills of playing the instruments and even the language particularly the rhymes used in the lyrics. Many Zimbabwean dancehall artists such as Soul Jah Love, Shinsoman, Sir Calaz and Winky D borrow foreign elements to enrich the flavour of Zimbabwean dancehall music. Zimbabwean dancehall music mainly incorporates elements of Ragga in it due to contact

with Jamaican artistes (Sizzla Kalonji) that toured Zimbabwe during 2004. Winky D had a stint in Jamaica where he was performing with Jamaican bands. Many Jamaican bands toured Zimbabwe and local musicians were eager to humble themselves by playing this foreign music and also imitating foreign performers and this has come to affect even Zimbabwean dancehall artists of today. Dancehall chanters such as Yellow man, Ninja man, Buju Banton and the late Tenor Saw were among the founding artistes to pave the way for popular artistes such as Major E, Buka T and God Fatha Temple Man. Today the music and dances of artists such as Dadza D closely resemble the acts of the foreign pacesetters some of whom we have referred to earlier in this section.

## **Discussion**

We notice that the terrain in popular music in Zimbabwe is driven by capitalist motives to market/promote music that is initially perceived to have a mass appeal. This music is shopped and encouraged by professional music producers who influence artists to play music that they purport to bring food on the table at the of the day. This explains the proliferation of artists who sing sungura, dancehall, gospel and rap music genres and record their work in many studios that have sprouted mainly in Harare and also in the country's smaller towns of Bulawayo, Gweru, Mutare and Masvingo. This music is distributed through the mass media. Citizens share the songs they like through distribution media such as flash discs, compact discs, memory cards, and via Bluetooth, or through the social media of whatsapp, facebook, twitter, wicchat and talkray. Money is the chief motivator for artists, promoters, managers, producers and pirates.

The growth of popular music in Zimbabwe has hinged on two western concepts which are entertainment and profit making. These two form the fundamental basis for music business. Dube (1996) says, "Popular music performance was being shaped both by colonial and business interests." The points alluded to by Dube (1996) continue to place influence on promotion, marketing, sales and consumption of popular music. In his review of Turino's (2000) book, Chitando (2002) upheld the same point emphasizing what Turino says about socialist and capitalist ideologies in shaping the way for popular music in Zimbabwe. Thus the concept of popular music in the Zimbabwe music industry is quite western and the masses fully embrace it like that.

The impression of popular music across the world is primarily focused on appealing to the masses. However, to some extent that is a common feature in many cultures. In Africa traditionally an appeal to the masses was a concern on issues pertaining to health,

food, and most matters dealing with life and death. Africans over time have slowly embraced the question of earning a living through popular music. Traditionally, Africans were not starved of entertainment such that buying it was not necessary as it was freely given and open to all. Currently, the venture into the music industry to make a name and establish oneself transcends the fulfillment one's musical endowments. One of the objectives held by promoters and musicians alike is to bring food onto the table even if the effort bypasses quality assurance on the product.

One attribute of digital technology is evident loss of a dynamic range in popular music as everything sounds very loud. The louder the better saying tends to appeal to the masses yet the quality of any music is not about how loud it should be. Quality of music centres on the principle of balance between the musical instruments in terms of loudness and or softness of dynamic levels. Conversely popular music has established the following tenets that: loud volumes appeal fast tempo, idiomatic lyrics, mixing many languages both formal and colloquial (including slang) that have different grammatical rules tend to appeal to the mass hence the term popular,

## **Conclusion**

In his introductory remarks on the subject of censorship of popular music Eyre (2001:8) reckons that, "Zimbabwe is home to an impressive array of traditional and popular music". The above statement makes this research article very important. Based upon the above quotation, it is reasonable to say that Zimbabwe presents a number of metropolitan cities where popular music can be studied. Indeed the study of popular music from the view of promotion provides a balanced view of the popular music industry. It further enables the reader to understand the factors that propel music promoters.

It can be drawn that popular music is dynamic as it follows the socio-political trends in the society to inform the promotional, marketing and sales issues so popular music thrives on profit making without which it falls away from the domain of popular music.

Even if the socio political climate in different countries differs from one nation to another, it is a fact that socio-political and economic hardships and other factors combined help to propel the prowess of popular music across the social classes of the people.



We also conclude that if at all the economic situation in Zimbabwe does change for the better with the majority of the working class earning more disposable income, there could be some buying power for popular music thus shunning pirate CDs hence an appreciation for intellectual property.

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